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Osaka University

AN ATTEMPT AT ANALYZING VERBAL IRONIES AND JOKES

1 INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have studied jokes and ironies in linguistics. It is often said that ironies and jokes share many common features. However, scholars regard jokes and ironies as separate linguistic phenomena. In this brief discussion, I claim that they cannot be separated from each other discretely because there are many examples of ‘ironical joke’, which have both an ironical intention and an amusing effect. Moreover, I claim that the definitions of ironies and jokes are not clear enough. In many cases, these problems have not been addressed. I claim that we need clear definitions to analyze these linguistic phenomena. In this paper, I consider the interaction between ironies and jokes and analyze some typical examples of ironies, jokes, and ‘ironical jokes’ and present the original definitions of the three rhetorical categories, focusing on the intention of the speaker and the effects on the hearer. In section 2, I will demonstrate that ironies and jokes have common features, as highlighted in previous studies. In section 3 I will analyze ‘ironical jokes’. In section 4, I will illustrate the differences and commonalities between ironies and jokes. In section 5, I will present my original definitions of the three categories.

2 THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN IRONIES AND JOKES: PREVIOUS RESEARCHES

In previous studies, many scholars have analyzed ironies and jokes. Though some of them have pointed out their similarities, they have not fully compared ironies with jokes. I claim that we should pay more attention to their common features. Here I present their common features, as suggested in previous studies:

- (1) [Grice and Neo-Gricean]
Ironies and jokes are texts involving a violation of Grice’s cooperative principle. This violation triggers conversational implicatures.
(Attardo 1993 & Utsumi 2000: my own summary)

(2) [Mention theory: Relevance theorists]

All the standard cases of ironies and jokes involve the mention of a proposition. An irony or joke echoes someone's thought, utterance, expectation, or cultural norm, in which the speaker dissociates herself from the echoed materials.

(Higashimori and Yoshimura 2003: my own summary)

As stated above, their common features have been highlighted in previous studies. Therefore, even if you take whichever viewpoint in your analysis, you cannot think of them as entirely different phenomena separated from each other.

I will not take these viewpoints because these theories have some problems. First, the problem of Gricean and Neo-Gricean theories is their claim that ironies and jokes involve a violation of Grice's cooperative principle. Nevertheless, in some examples, we will judge them not to involve any violation of Grice's cooperative principle or we cannot clearly judge whether they involve any violation.

(3) [situation] *A mother asked her son to clean up his messy room, but he was lost in a comic book. After a while, she discovered that his room was still messy, and said to her son:*

a. This room is totally clean!

b. I love children who keep their rooms clean.

(Utsumi 2000)

In this example of irony, (3a) clearly includes a violation of Grice's cooperative principle (maxim of quality) because the proposition that the son's room is totally clean is clearly false in the situation of (3). However, (3b) does not seem to include any violation but it still works as an irony. Moreover, many examples of jokes do not seem to include any violation.

(4) If your son flunks out of school and is illiterate and anti-social, what can he grow up to be?

An Italian policeman.

(Ritchie 2004: 56)

The joke in (4) is based on the mutual knowledge about Italian policemen. The answer 'An Italian policeman' does not seem to violate Grice's cooperative principle. Yet, the example in (4) works as a joke.

In other words, a violation of Grice's cooperative principle is not necessary for ironies or jokes. I claim that this violation-based approach covers only a restricted range of ironies and jokes. Therefore, I do not adopt this approach in this discussion.

With regards (2), Relevance theorists say that all the standard cases of ironies and jokes involve the mention of a proposition. Although this theory may appear to be unproblematic, I claim that applying the mention theory to ironies and jokes is not without a problem, because an 'echoic use' can be related to various possible

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expressions. Attardo (1993) highlighted the problem of ‘infinite regression’, which I support.

if the mention theory admits zero-mention (that is, mention without any surface trace of the operation) there is an immediate danger of an infinite regression. If sentences can be zero-mentioned, any mentioned sentence can be zero-mentioned, including any zero-mentioned sentence, etc., thus producing an infinite regression.
(Attardo 1993)

I think that infinite regression is gravely problematic. For example, a quotation is a kind of echoic use:

- (5) Mary: What did Paul said last night?
John: He said, “I am very tired”.

Thus, even if an expression does not generate any implicature, it can be an echoic use. The concept of echoic use is too wide. Therefore, I will not adopt the mention theory in this paper, either.

I claim that previous studies are insufficient. Therefore, I will attempt to analyze ironical jokes based on my own methods. I will attempt to conduct research on the commonalities and differences between ironies and jokes and focus on their effects on hearers. In the next section, I will analyze ‘ironical jokes’.

3 IRONICAL JOKES

In this section, I analyze ‘ironical jokes’. First, the general definition of ironies, jokes and ironical jokes (first approximation) are as follows:

- (6) Irony: an utterance (or a text) with which the speaker has the intention of criticizing indirectly and which will have an effect of criticizing someone (if it works)
- (7) Joke: an utterance (or a text) with which the speaker has the intention of making hearers laugh and which will have an effect of making hearers laugh (if it works)
- (8) Ironical joke: an utterance that has both the characteristics of ironies and jokes

I will analyze some typical ‘ironical jokes’ and brush up these definitions based on the consideration of the differences between ironies and jokes. In this paper, I will focus

especially on their effects on the hearers.

Now let us consider the following examples:

- (9) (teacher) “Rita, what will you do when you get as big as your mother?”
 (Rita) “Go on a diet, miss”.

(Higashimori 2011: 7)

- (10) A strict aunt came to tea and said her niece, “Eat up your spinach, child, and you’ll grow up to be beautiful.” “Didn’t they have spinach in your day Auntie?” came the reply.

(ibid.: 37)

In (9) the teacher asks Rita what she will do when she grows up as old as the teacher. However, Rita intentionally misunderstands this utterance and answers in an unexpected way. Rita’s utterance has the intention of criticizing her mother’s bodily shape. In (10) the utterance of the niece “Didn’t they have spinach in your day Auntie” has the intention of criticizing the aunt’s looks.

In these examples, there are two important points. First, the speaker intends to criticize the object of his/her utterance (The object may be in the speech situation, or may not be present in the situation). In (9), Rita has the intention of criticizing the shape of her mother (probably, her mother is not present in the situation). Similarly, in (10), the niece has the intention of criticizing the aunt’s looks. I will call this object ‘target’ henceforth. Second, these utterances make the other hearers laugh. In (9) and (10), the hearers, except the target of the ironical intention, will likely laugh.

From this analysis, ironical jokes appear to have two aspects (the ironical aspect and funny aspect). I define the function of ironical jokes as follows:

- (11) (Ironical jokes)

Ironical aspect: The speaker has the intention of criticizing the target.

Funny aspect: The utterance makes the other hearers except the target of criticism laugh.

I claim that these two aspects of ironical jokes suggest the difference between ironies and jokes. I will discuss it in the next section.

4 THE COMMONALITY AND DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IRONIES AND JOKES

Based on the above analysis of some ironical jokes, I hypothesize about the difference between ironies and jokes in (11) as follows:

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- (12) An irony has direct objects of sarcasm. The sarcastic effect does not extend to the other hearers except the targets of sarcasm.
- (13) A joke has a funny effect on hearers. This effect can extend to other hearers in addition to the hearers a joke is directed to.

In other words, I claim that the difference between ironies and jokes is the extent that their effects. From this viewpoint, if a speaker utters (10) to an object of sarcastic intention (the aunt) and if there is no other hearer except the object, this utterance does not have a funny effect. In that case, the example (9) is only categorized as an irony. On the other hand, when other people are listening, (9) would be an ironical joke.

An ironical joke has the characteristics of ironies and jokes. The speaker has the intention of criticizing someone and of making other hearers laugh. Furthermore, it generates the effects of criticizing the objects and making them laugh, if it works.

In addition, there are many non-ironical jokes. The following is an example:

- (14) CUSTOMER: I can't find words to express my annoyance.
STORE CLERK: May I sell you a dictionary?

(Higashimori 2011: 8)

In (14), the customer intends to tell the clerk "I am so annoyed that I cannot express it." However, the clerk intentionally misunderstands the customer's utterance as "I cannot remember words to express my annoyance." In this case, the clerk has no intention of criticizing the customer but the clerk's utterance has a funny effect. Therefore, this example is categorized as a non-ironical joke. In other words, a simple joke does not have the speaker's intention of criticizing someone, but the intention of making hearers laugh. On the other hand, a simple irony does not have the intention of making hearers laugh but the intention of criticizing someone. This is the difference between simple ironies and simple jokes. With regard to this topic, I have another question of whether there are any non-funny ironies. As stated above, it can be dependent on the context. Therefore, I intend to make my research topic in the future.

Many previous researchers say that ironies and jokes have many common characteristics. They claim that many ironies and jokes involve false propositions. Here, 'false proposition' means that the proposition of the utterance is not true for the hearer in the situation where the utterance is spoken. I basically agree with this idea. However, the utterance that does not involve any false proposition can be an irony, a joke or an ironical joke. The examples (9), (10), and (14) do not seem to involve false propositions but they have the functions of ironies and jokes. This is at least counted as a commonality among the three categories of rhetorical expressions. I propose that a new framework is needed for the analysis of ironies and jokes.

5 THE ORIGINAL DEFINITIONS OF IRONIES, JOKES AND IRONICAL JOKES

In the previous section, I observed the commonalities and differences between ironies and jokes. From the above discussion, I propose the revised versions of the original general definitions ironies, jokes, and ironical jokes:

- (15) An irony is an utterance with which the speaker has an **intention** of indirectly criticizing a target and which will have an **effect** of criticizing the target. This effect does not extend to other hearers except the targets of sarcasm.
- (16) A joke is an utterance with which the speaker has an **intention** of making the target laugh and which will have an **effect** of making a target laugh. This effect extends to other hearers in addition to the target.
- (17) An ironical joke is an utterance with which the speaker has an **intention** of indirectly criticizing a target and making the hearers except the target laugh and which will have an **effect** of criticizing the target and making other hearers except the target laugh.

These definitions are more detailed than (6), (7), and (8), respectively. In this paper, I focused on the intention of the speaker and the effects on the hearer. However, I must consider the linguistic structures of these different types of rhetorical expression and classify ironies and jokes into more detailed categories. These issues will be my future research subjects.

6 CONCLUSION

From the analysis in this brief discussion, I hypothesize as follows: Irony is a sort of jokes because of the presence of 'ironical jokes'. In other words, irony has a funny effect on hearers except the object of sarcasm. Because of some shared commonalities between the two rhetorical expressions, such as the funny effect, I assert that we should not divide ironies and jokes as distinct categories. Analyzing them together may reveal their linguistic commonalities and the reason why jokes make hearers laugh. In addition, I claim that ironies and jokes should be defined more explicitly as more detailed definitions are necessary for further studies.

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